

# Protecting County Records:

## *Archives & History Helps Allendale County Protect County Records After Courthouse Fire*

*By Rusty Sox, Public Relations Director, S.C. Archives & History Center*

**T**he May 18 fire at the Allendale County Courthouse is a painful reminder of how vulnerable our public buildings can be to fire. Even more vulnerable are the important records that so many of these buildings contain: documents whose protection are vital to the smooth operation of government and the accurate recording of history.

Once the fire was out in Allendale, local attention quickly turned to the condition of the county's records that were stored in the courthouse. How badly were they damaged? Could the damaged records be salvaged? How could officials protect the intact records from further threat?

Mary Jean Carlson, Allendale Clerk of Court, wasted no time calling the South Carolina Department of Archives and History in Columbia, where the Conservation Center staff provided detailed instructions for quickly beginning recovery procedures.

"We advised courthouse staff to set up a temporary command center where wet and damaged records could be spread out to air dry," said Theresa

Montgomery, manager of conservation services at the Department of Archives and History.

"We also recommended that the county set up fans to circulate air over the documents and inhibit the growth of mold," Montgomery added. "We even offered to send some of our own high-powered fans to Allendale."

The next day the archives dispatched staff members, fans in hand, to Allendale to help assess the damage to records and assist in the recovery effort. State Archivist Roy H. Tryon, Records Services Supervisor Richard Harris and Local Records Manager John Mackintosh delivered emergency supplies. Polyethylene sheeting, latex gloves, pencils, newsprint and archival storage boxes would prove to be simple but effective tools as

Allendale officials worked to salvage and protect the county's records.

Tryon, Harris, and Mackintosh found that, in spite of the fire, many records were reasonably safe. The county's deeds and plats had been microfilmed and copies of the film existed outside the courthouse, insuring

that those documents were recoverable. Although they had never been microfilmed, probate and court records were stored in vaults that protected them from water damage.

Other records in the courthouse did not fare so well. The county had used the basement for records storage, and the firefighting effort left the basement several feet deep in water. No inventory of the records existed, so officials could not be sure which records were affected or how vital they might be. The courthouse's computer system was damaged, and the fate of records stored electronically was unknown.

"The courthouse vaults proved invaluable in saving the vital Clerk of Court and Probate records from severe water damage," John Mackintosh said.

Mackintosh said vaults are not always the most dependable tools for preserving records. They can fail structurally, and offices tend to outgrow them quickly. Luckily, Allendale's vaults remained secure, but archives officials recommend security microfilm as the best means of preserving records.

Throughout the following weeks, various staff members from the Department of Archives and History traveled to Allendale to assist in the recovery. Important and heavily damaged tax records, finally recovered from the flooded basement, were sent to a facility in Atlanta where they could be freeze dried. BMS Catastrophe, Inc., a commercial recovery service, was called in to help retrieve computerized records. All the while, county staff worked to identify which records needed immediate attention and which were less critical in the aftermath of the fire.

"Prioritizing where to spend the most effort is a critically important activity in a disaster recovery operation," said State Archivist Roy H. Tryon. "This helps ensure that disaster recovery resources are not devoted to records of limited value or to those which, though important, may have already been microfilmed or copied and are stored in a secure off-site location."

To what extent Allendale will be able to recover its damaged county records is not yet known. Conservators are still trying to salvage some of the most heavily damaged articles. Others,



while damaged, are still legible and can be microfilmed to preserve their information content. Limited staff and financial resources may dictate the degree to which Allendale's records can be preserved.

No one expects a fire or other major disaster to happen, but being prepared to deal with a disaster is the key to effective recovery.

"Pre-planning for a possible disaster is far more cost effective than recovery," said Pat Morris of the Archives' Collections Management unit. "Disaster mitigation is usually no more than making sure permanent original records are in secure storage. An annual inspection of storage areas is essential."

The Archives offers the following advice for county or local government offices that store valuable documents:

- Have a disaster recovery plan in place. Appoint a team with a leader to coordinate recovery efforts in the event of a disaster. Team members should be professionally trained, and all other staff fully informed of procedures before an incident occurs.

- Never store permanently valuable records in a basement or an attic unless there are microfilmed copies of these records stored off site. Attics are susceptible to fire and basements tend to fill up with water. Neither generally provides adequate temperature and humidity controls for protecting records.

- Be aware of government and commercial recovery services that can assist in the event of a disaster. Know what services they are capable of providing and how to coordinate these activities to maximize success and minimize cost. The South Carolina Department of Archives and History maintains a list of recovery service providers for use by county and local governments.

- Maintain a current inventory of records and their locations. The archives can maintain a copy of this list for you so as to provide a secure, off-site location for obtaining the list in the event of a disaster. Knowing what you have and where you have it can eliminate guesswork and lost time if a

disaster happens.

- Microfilm permanently valuable records whenever possible, and arrange to store the original microfilm in the archives' temperature-controlled vault. Microfilm storage is a free service of the archives.

Technical assistance, publications and training on records inventories, storage standards, disaster preparedness and recovery, and microfilming are readily available through the S.C. Department of Archives and History's Records Management Unit. For more information, please call the Records Management Unit at (803) 896-6122.



## COUNTY FOCUS

### *Advertise in* **COUNTY FOCUS MAGAZINE**

... and target more than 1,500 members of the South Carolina Association of Counties, the only organization dedicated to statewide representation of county government in South Carolina.

COUNTY FOCUS reaches elected and appointed county officials, and is the only publication that highlights county issues, legislation and successful county programs, projects and activities. The magazine also publishes articles by U.S. Senators and Congressmen concerning important issues facing county officials across the state.

#### **Advertising Deadlines:**

■ April 17	Issue Number 1
■ July 15	Issue Number 2
■ Oct. 31	Issue Number 3
■ Dec. 15	Issue Number 4

**For more information, including current advertising rates and a recent copy of COUNTY FOCUS MAGAZINE, please contact:**

**Public Information Director**  
**South Carolina**  
**Association of Counties**  
**P.O. Box 8207**  
**Columbia, S.C. 29202-8207**  
**(803) 252-7255**

**E-mail: [stuart@scac.state.sc.us](mailto:stuart@scac.state.sc.us)**

